

Introduction

ETHNORACIAL INTIMACIES IN BLACKTINO QUEER PERFORMANCE

E. Patrick Johnson and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera

We thought we were the first Rivera/Johnson blacktino queer duo, but we are not. Long before we premiered, paraded, and pumped up our blacktino drag in the ivory tower and down the hallowed halls of Northwestern University, transgender and drag queen militants Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson were painting the streets of New York red with their fierce self-presentation and activism, which includes participation in the Stonewall Riots of 1969. Both Rivera and Johnson serve as our blacktino drag mothers, and their friendship and commitment to social justice for queers of color reflect the “sisterhood” and political commitments shared by the editors of this volume. Born in 1951 in New York to a Puerto Rican father and Venezuelan mother, at age eleven Sylvia Rivera became homeless and lived on the streets, where she found refuge among drag queens. Despite her social class, she always served high femme face and chic shawl couture. Her coactivist friend, black drag queen Marsha P. Johnson, who was born in neighboring New Jersey in 1944, preferred a more kitsch, but nonetheless fierce look, for as she says in the film *Pay It No Mind: The Life and Times of Marsha P. Johnson*, she “never, ever, ever [did] drag seriously” because “she didn’t have the money to do serious drag.” Grounded by their experiences of growing up as poor, queer, outcasts, in the early 1970s Rivera and Johnson cofounded Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), an organization they created to support homeless young drag queens and transgender people. Queer, Latina/o, black, poor—and fierce—these two drag foremothers’ stories align with the editors’ personal histories, politics, collaborative spirit, and sartorial signifying.

Two nappy-headed queens—one reared in a shotgun apartment in an all-black neighborhood in the U.S. South and the other in a roomier home but no less black neighborhood in the countryside of Puerto Rico—E. Patrick and Ramón were destined to cross paths in the way

that queer migrations and diasporas traffic in the uncanny and the serendipitous. One would think that E. Patrick's bad Spanish, taught to him in high school by a teacher with a severe southern drawl (e.g., she pronounced "dígame la verdad" as "DEE-go-may law-BER-dawd"), and Ramon's ignorance of black American vernacular (e.g., he did not know that a "hoopy" is an expensive car such as a Cadillac that is visually in disrepair) would prohibit them from crossing linguistic and physical borders to collaborate. And yet, it was the confluence of queer fate, orishas, and a penchant for racial drag that brought these two misfits together to initiate the blacktino bristerhood modeled by mothers Sylvia and Marsha.

When we met in the fall of 2006 during Ramón's campus visit for a job in the Department of Performance Studies at Northwestern where E. Patrick was the chair, we did not know we were kin, except through our queerness. Ramón did not know of E. Patrick's mother's ignorance about Latina/o culture when she made the occasional racist comment about "a thousand" of those "foreigners" living in the same house and "smelling bad," referring to the new population of Mexican immigrants who had moved into the family's once all-black neighborhood of public housing, despite the fact that E. Patrick's mother and her seven children all lived in a one-bedroom apartment just thirty years prior. E. Patrick did not know of Ramón's grandmother's fear of Ramón being thought of as black and her causing him to have a deviated septum because of the clothespin she clamped on his nose to keep it pointed. Ironically, this same grandmother would travel with Ramón in 2013 to North Carolina, E. Patrick's state of birth, to the North Carolina Museum of History for the annual African American Culture Celebration during the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.

These family "outings" to each other about race and class undergird the ways in which we are both implicated in the fictions we inherited from biological and chosen kin. Our "nappy headed" epistemologies led us to different interpretations of race and class due to the cultural contexts in which we were reared, but do not undo the persistent promiscuity with which our queerness seeks pleasure "inside" the other. Part of the pleasure is the intellectual incest that keeps us primed and ready to pursue coalitions across what might seem to be impenetrable gaps. As queer, black, and Latino performance scholars, we wanted to find a way to cull the richness of our multiple subjectivities that would allow for the confluences, comparisons, and contradictions therein. Rather than sashay away, we desired to stay and shantay our way into the troubled erotic waters of black and brown conjugal elaborations. It was

through our dedication to the labor of queer production that *Blacktino Queer Performance* was born.

This collection brings together the performance scripts of black and Latina/o queer playwrights and performance artists working in the United States, along with critical essays and interviews conducted or written by leading scholars of black, Latina/o, and queer expressive practices. The volume seeks to stage a conversation between queer black and brown performance works and critical traditions. That is, we want to propose with this anthology that there is much to be gained from the particular comparative interarticulation of black and Latina/o queer expressive practices that the very term “blacktino” introduces.

From the outset it is important that we engage the three terms that compose the title of the anthology: “blacktino,” “queer,” and “performance.” We see as productive the interanimation of these terms as they coalesce, collide, and converge variably along the promiscuous borders of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class. These terms allow us not only a way to contextualize the artists’ and scholars’ works that are contained between the anthology’s covers but also a way to engage our interdisciplinary “homes” of black studies, Latina/o studies, queer studies, and performance studies. Indeed, each of these areas has had its share of stubborn elisions of gender, sexuality, and performance in the case of black and Latina/o studies, and race in the case of queer and performance studies. There is also evidence of ethnoracial silos in black studies around issues of *latinidad* and in Latina/o studies around issues of blackness. Concomitantly, we wish to move beyond the bourgeois academic ivory tower and engage the material conditions of the projects, barrios, dance floors, and other sites where quotidian forms of racialized queerness manifest through performance. We believe, therefore, this titular triumvirate of *Blacktino Queer Performance* provides us an opportunity to mine the discursive and material terrain that these terms always already engage—on the streets and in the sheets.

Variouly spelled as “blacktino,” “blaktino,” or “blatino,” the term accounts for both interracial subjectivities and social relations. In popular mainstream media, “blacktino” generally describes children of African American and Latino mixed heritage as well as black Latinos or Afro-Latinos with Afro-diasporic ancestry outside the U.S. national boundaries. In this sense, the term can address the historical legacy of Afro-descendant Latin American migrants to the United States as well as slightly more contemporaneous social and cultural exchanges between U.S. African American and U.S. Latina/o communities. Nonetheless, while the United States is the “common ground” upon which these

black and brown artists produce their work, they also gesture well beyond U.S. borders into Cuba, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Haiti, Puerto Rico, and West Africa.

But “blacktino” has also been animated in myriad ways to point to other forms of exchange of intimacy between black and brown. The example of Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera is one of many instances where queer leisure and queer politics converge. An important antecedent to blacktino is to be found in the Third World and women-of-color feminisms of the 1980s, which sought to develop alliances among feminists invested in critical race and postcolonial frameworks for understanding and enacting the politics of gender and sexuality and which still exists through organizations like the Audre Lorde Project and Salsa Soul Sisters in New York and Allgo in Texas. Of primary relevance to our project is the currency the term “blatino” gained in the 1990s onward as a designation for black and brown queer relations; from dance clubs like Blatino Bronx Factory, Escuelita, and Krash in New York City, Bench and Bar in Oakland, and Traxx in Atlanta; to the artistic collaborations like that of the BlakTino Festival at the Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance. “Blatino” also emerged during this period as a significant subgenre of gay porn that featured sex between Latino and African American performers. Harlem Boys, Latino Fan Club, and Enrique Cruz’s Lamancha Videos are perhaps three of the best-known production companies to develop under this rubric in New York City, but the trend has developed into a more formalized network of nightlife spots, websites, blogs, porn awards, and much more. It has also extended geographically beyond New York, Philadelphia, and the rest of the northeast United States to projects as varied as the annual Blatino Oasis Retreat in Palm Springs (begun in 2006), gay escort services in Texas, and Miami’s Cock Boys porn flicks featuring black and Latino performers getting jiggy with it.

Blacktino as a designation recognizes a history of cohabitation between African American and Latina/o communities, animates black and brown sexual and social intimacies in the present, and centers cultural and political desires that might yield more solidary futures. Colonization and subjugation, as well as resistance to and perseverance in the face of these structural forms of domination, mark these histories and futures of intimacy. While the black Atlantic slave trade inaugurated a nonvoluntary diaspora, one by-product of that event was not only the syncretic process of African and Latina/o American cultures, but also the queering of the Atlantic itself, as Omi’seke Natasha Tinsley has so beautifully argued.¹ It also produced various religious

forms where black and brown bodies imbibe gender/queer orishas, as the work of Sharon Bridgforth captures.²

We are also aware of the ways in which blacktino, or the more common usage of blatino, may inaugurate a troublesome collapse of difference in the eyes of a consuming homonormative public that simply homogenizes racial otherness as fetishistic ahistorical object.³ This is perhaps much more present in the pornography industry, but also in circulation in much of the nightclub scene, whereby blatino can run the risk of making a problematically amalgamated “colored object” available to white patrons. And it is precisely because the term “blacktino” allows us to look at all of these things at the same time—queer subjects who configure their identities as both black and brown; queer social exchanges, intimacies, and conflicts between African Americans and Latinas/os; and the historical and contemporary relationships between black and Latina/o queer communities with homonormative whiteness—that we think the term proves both adequate and generative for our collection.

It does not come as news that queer theory, from its early inception, has had some “race” trouble. The inattention to or downright hostility toward race as a category of analysis in queer studies was met with a backlash that continues.⁴ Nonetheless, the capaciousness of the term “queer” was too productive to throw the baby out with the bath water—even if we wanted to kill our little darling! We agree with Jafari Sinclaire Allen’s assessment that “queer does . . . uniquely capture the sense of the nonnormative status of men, women, and others who identify with or are identified as homosexual or bisexual, and those whose gender self-identification is not resonant with the sex assigned to them at birth.”⁵ What black and Latina/o scholars have done, then, is to make queer work by throwing shadings of meaning on it such as E. Patrick Johnson’s rearticulation of “queer” as “quare” or developing new theoretical frameworks altogether. Two such examples are José Esteban Muñoz and Roderick Ferguson, who, building off of the intersectional advocacy of women-of-color feminism and performance, asked us to regard seriously the variables of race, ethnicity, and class when venturing into the focused analysis of gender and sexuality that so shaped the formation of queer theory and queer studies in the American academy. Muñoz proposed the notion of “disidentification” to explain the complicated process through which queer artists of color work on and against a system in which they are always already entrenched, while Ferguson’s “queer of color critique” brings to bear an indictment of canonical sociology’s incessant reinforcement of heteropatriarchy and patholo-

gizing of bodies of color as perverse.⁶ Undergirding both theoretical formations is the argument that queer ethno-racial minorities, especially when working class and/or the working poor, converge at the margins of homonormative white culture.

No less through theory than through performance did 1970s and 1980s feminists of color forge the physical and metaphorical “bridge” that instantiated the interconnectedness of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Nonetheless, performance studies has also had its moments of racial amnesia, casting to the side the contributions of black and brown artists who have, arguably, been at the forefront of creative scholarly production.⁷ As with queer studies, however, performance as method, object, and trope has proved useful in enunciating identity as a complex and contested site. More germane to our project here, however, is the fact that performance is a site at which brown and black queer cultures share what Allen, following Marshall Sahlins, Sherry Ortner, and Stuart Hall, calls “conjunctural moments.” According to Allen, “conjunctural moments . . . index the temporal space in which the articulation . . . of sometimes related and other times opposing or unrelated discourses, practices, or trajectories reshape, reimagine, or alter our view of the present” (214). Performance as a key transcendent temporal and spatial trope symbolizes nicely the promiscuous and frisky relations between black and brown.

Before we delve into the contents of this collection, let us consider briefly, as foundational examples, the powerful and widely circulated works of Ntozake Shange, Cherríe Moraga, and Djola Branner, all pieces that render black and Latina/o intersections and offer us an entry point into the theorization of blacktino as a performance analytic. In Ntozake Shange’s now canonical choreopoem/play *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, the character “Lady in Blue” announces: “my papa thot he was puerto rican & we wda have been/cept we waz just reglar niggahs wit hints of Spanish.”⁸ And the speaker in Cherríe Moraga’s poem “MeXicana Blues” says: “I am/that much/American/a colored woman cryin’/in black English/a song that won’t hurt/nobody with my bitterness.”⁹ Lady in Blue is on her way to hear Nuyorican musician Willie Colón play in Spanish Harlem, fusing black vernacular with Spanglish on and off the salsa dance floor, while Moraga’s speaker employs the trope of the downtrodden “colored woman” (i.e., black) to speak to the history of exploitation of Chicana labor. In both instances the blues motif sutures black and brown through linguistic, psychic, emotional, and physical geographies of intimacy.

Intimacy is highlighted through religion in Djola Branner's play *oranges & honey*, in which Rafael, a young queer Cuban, makes an offering of oranges and honey to the orisha Oshun, the goddess of the river, where he seeks healing from the memory of being raped by his stepbrother. In one scene, Rafael and Oshun dance to house music as Rafael remembers the passion he feels toward a man he meets on the dance floor, initiated by the music: "his eyes las manos his thighs/como una flor the heat rose/his pinga full and/throbbing against mine, y con las manos grandes/he touched my nipple y como un volcan i exploded/right there on the dance floor."¹⁰ As a black queer writer and performer, Branner is familiar with black queer nightlife and the role the dance floor plays where house music is a generative force of spiritual and sexual ecstasy.¹¹ In this scene, he combines the ritual of black queer club life with that of Afro-Latino religious ritual as Rafael "dances" with Oshun, who is neither male nor female, "making connections between diasporic blackness, gender fluidity, house music, religion, sexuality, spirituality and how they are intertwined to create a site of healing."¹²

In their works, Shange, Moraga, and Branner demonstrate the dynamic role blacktino may play as an optic for understanding engagements with black and Latina/o experience, aesthetics, and erotics in performance. They also evidence the history of blacktino in feminist and queer performance. It is between their playing up and feeling up—that is, erotically and indulgently touching—blackness and latinidad where we find blacktino similarly manifests in the works included in this collection.

This "unholy" trinity (some might say perverse trinity) of blacktino, queer, and performance, then, proves generative to make the multiple moves we wish to make to frame this gathering of black and Latina/o queer work. We suggest that "blacktino" as a framing device or critical optic allows us to maintain the goals of queer-of-color critique and to ground it in the specificities of black and brown intergroup relations. We privilege "queer" to recoup its radical potentiality and futurity. Performance makes material the discursive conditions of life at the margins. And we are serious about what performance makes possible! From Marsha P. Johnson's generous poor drag to Sylvia Rivera's passionately angry banter, it is performance that sustains blacktino and queer not simply as an assumed continuum of identity but, perhaps more significantly, as purposeful practice.

Our approach is then to engage with the history and contemporary manifestations of black and brown queer intimacies in contemporary queer performance in the United States and the diaspora. Accordingly,

we wish to chart a way of understanding convergences and divergences of black and Latina/o queer experience that assume these intimate relations as critical, even formative. To put it simply, we are as interested in works that address the intersection of black and Latina/o queer communities as we are in assuming those intersections when critically looking at works by black and Latina/o queer artists next to each other. *Blacktino* is then a sociologically specific as well as a critically comparative project. But remaining true to the performance paradigm, *blacktino* is also the thing we wish to both imagine and make real in the very practice of criticism. We invite our reader to adopt a *blacktino* queer approach to analysis by not assuming the units of this collection to be discrete or impermeable.

In this volume, we bring together nine black and Latina/o queer artists' work. The diversity of these artists registers not only along the lines of ethno-racial affinity, but also generationally, from well-established artists to newcomers, and from artists working within traditional theater forms to those who work outside them. For us, such a broad array of artists and art making that nonetheless reflects the sensibilities and politics of black and Latina/o queer aesthetics and cultures, speaks to the multiple ways in which social relations recur to discursive as well as material ways of performing race and sexuality.

The materials collected here—script, essay, interview—accentuate further *blacktino* as a reading strategy as it highlights the relationships among playwrights, performers, designers, and critics. For example, the scripts on their own avail themselves to close readings, but information about the playwright's process and the critic's assessment of the work provides a multiplicity of voices in the act of meaning making. In a few instances, the scholar also functions as artistic collaborator, as in the case of Tamara Roberts, Matt Richardson, and Marlon Bailey. Their insightful ruminations about the performance process offer a metacritical frame rarely available to audiences and readers who seldom have access to such a perspective. Moreover, the critics and interviewers do more than advocate and champion the works collected here; some of them, such as D. Soyini Madison and Lisa B. Thompson, also challenge the writers on their artistic and political choices. Indeed, the process of assembling this collection instituted *blacktino* queer performance as critical collaborative practice, as we staged a conversation among artists and scholars. In introducing the contents below we map out some of these conversations, not to delimit but to open up the myriad connections across texts, critical arguments, and conversations on process. It is our hope that these will produce even more conversations about

these artists, their techniques, and the intellectual labor that their work, in collaboration with scholars, makes possible.

We open the collection with poet, playwright, and director Sharon Bridgforth. She has been pushing the boundaries of conventional artistic forms for many years—and her show *The love conjure/blues Text Installation* is no exception. Based on her book *love conjure/blues*, which she defines as a “performance novel,” the text installation project draws on multimedia, including video and sound, to tell the story of gender-variant and queer rural black southerners—those living, dead, and unborn. Though the story is told from the vantage of one performer, a griot, the various media—poetry, narrative, film, sound—register a cacophony of voices that speak multiple truths and temporal and spatial realities. The video projection of the ensemble performing parts of the text, along with images of the bayou and flowing rivers, engulfs the audience and the actor, submerging both in the queer cosmology of the rural South and its “other worldly” inhabitants.

Matt Richardson’s essay, “Reinventing the Black Southern Community in Sharon Bridgforth’s *The love conjure/blues Text Installation*,” attributes the effectiveness of such representations to Bridgforth’s employment of the theatrical jazz aesthetic, a non-Western theatrical form that “acknowledges multiple states of reality.” Drawing on his own participation as a performer in the filmed components of the text installation, interviews with Bridgforth, and his work with her as member of the Austin Project, a women-of-color-focused artists’ group, Richardson employs an ethnographic perspective to analyze Bridgforth’s work. He suggests that the act of performance vis-à-vis the theatrical jazz aesthetic allows Bridgforth to bring disparate realities together—realities based on rural southern queer life—inaugurating reconciliation and healing between and among the South’s queer and nonqueer black communities. Ultimately, Richardson believes that it is indeed the overlap of text, image, and sound that unhinges gender from static representations and that enables Bridgforth to conjure the voices of black queer elders and ancestors to tell their stories.

In her interview with Sandra L. Richards, Bridgforth talks through some of the challenges of creating a piece that brings together the dead, the living, and the unborn. Key to tackling that challenge is her own process of workshopping her work so that she may learn from actors what should and should not stay in the piece. Tone and rhythm that emanate from the musicality of southern speech are the primary sources of Bridgforth’s writing process that she then “gives” to her performers and says, “What do you think?” It is the collaborative compo-

ment of her work, she says, that is in keeping with jazz—a rigid structure with room for improvisation. Because of this Bridgforth thinks of her text as a “musical score.”

The collaborative spirit of Bridgforth’s jazz aesthetic resonates with the ensemble methodologies of Teatro Luna, the only all-Latina feminist theater ensemble currently active in the United States. Since its inception in 2000, the company has been devoted to the development of theater about the Latina experience and has done so through an ethnographic performance methodology that collects the stories of women, including those of the performers, as primary source material for script development. *Machos*, which is included in this collection, represents a new application of this method as the stories collected through the interview process were those of men, Latinos and non-Latinos alike, interviewed about their experiences with the privileges and pressures of racialized masculinity. In this eclectic collection of thematically arranged skits, with some musical numbers as interludes, the Teatro Luna women perform in male drag scenes that range from serious explorations of gender propriety and heterosexual relationships to hilariously comic renditions of homosocial intimacy and homophobic anxieties.

In her essay, “Voicing Masculinity,” Tamara Roberts attends to the development of the script in rehearsal and focuses on three key elements of *Machos* as a performance: the juxtaposition of multiperspectival group scenes with single-story emphasis, the use of female performers in male drag, and the incorporation of camp within a primarily realist aesthetic platform. Written from the insider perspective of the sound designer, Roberts’s close and incisive analysis demonstrates the various ways in which Teatro Luna approached the study of masculinity through performance to question the inner workings of heteropatriarchy and its reliance on quotidian dramaturgies to rehearse its naturalized force. But she also offers a poignant critique of the inherent biologism of the company’s approach, concluding that the difference “between macho as a state of being, and being macho as a performance, is made but ultimately reinscribed” in *Machos*.

Roberts’s observations are further illuminated in Patricia Ybarra’s interview with *Machos* director and Teatro Luna cofounder Coya Paz. Paz describes her collaboration with the Teatro Luna ensemble as defined by varying investments in, and sometimes rejections of, feminism among company members. These differences result in frictive but nonetheless productive engagements with masculinity. Especially significant is Paz’s discussion of the company’s exploration of the ways machismo exerts very specific kinds of pressure on men who in turn

develop survival practices in response. Notably, she also discusses her ongoing concern throughout the process with not erasing or excusing the potential injurious consequences of these “survival” masculinities to women. These consequences extend as well to queer men, whom Paz discusses as similarly encountering the violence of masculinity during the gender workshops that led to the performance.

E. Patrick Johnson’s *Strange Fruit* picks up on the position of queer men, black queer men to be precise, and their experiences of gender and sexuality in a heteronormative and racist world. If Teatro Luna’s *Machos* launches the feminist theater collective into an exploration of masculinity, in his solo performance, Johnson honors the debt of his black queer gay male self-understanding and self-assertion to the politics of black feminism and the vernacular knowledge modeled and imparted by the black southern women in his family. Assuming a fragmentary structure to traverse a kaleidoscopic journey into black queer experience, Johnson moves quickly from scene to scene, playing not only himself but others in his story, both to present an assemblage of the pictorial, literary, and sonic black archives of queer life and to theorize the experiences it evidences.

As Johnson explains in his interview with Bernadette Marie Calafell, there is an intentional investment in juxtaposing the framed actions of the performer to a wealth of projected images to create a sensorial overload for the audience. This excess of intertextual references, anchored onto the materiality of the live labor of the performer before us, prompts Jennifer De Vere Brody in her essay, “Passing Strange: E. Patrick Johnson’s *Strange Fruit*,” to engage with Johnson’s “doing” of black gay art without falling into the pitfalls of essentialism. This results in a “documentary performance that draws on actual events in Johnson’s life while highlighting their performative dimensions and also contextualizing them in a critical genealogy of black gay image making,” the autobiographical and autoethnographic concerns Johnson points to in his interview.

Javier Cardona’s highly physical performance piece *Ah mén* is similarly concerned with exploring queer navigations of racialized heteromascularity. Best known for his solo work, Cardona works with an ensemble of six performers, including himself, to explore the interrelation between Puerto Rican religious tradition and disciplines and queerings of race, gender, and sexuality. *Ah mén* achieves this through a flirtatious engagement with innuendo, a staple of Catholic discretion, and its suggested undoings in the slippages of queer gesture or the anxious same-sex intimacies of Puerto Rican male homosociality. As Celiary Rivera-Velázquez and Beliza Torres Narváez suggest in their analysis

of the piece, *Ah mén* “parodies Caribbean and Latin American moralistic discourses that thrive in their condemnation and exclusion of those who do not conform to normative gender expressions.” At the same time, they note, the piece seems to ritualistically install its alternatives; choreographing ways of being together, queerly. And it is precisely this tension between the examination, even mocking, of structural oppression and the less announced assertion of queer possibility that Cardona seems to balance in his work and in his engagement with “queer” as a generative designator. As he discusses in his interview with Jossianna Arroyo, his interest or potential investment in queer has less to do with formally assumed political narratives than with the difference, even alterity, it may introduce to constructions of the norm, both social and aesthetic.

One of the many themes that emerges across several of these works, Cardona’s among them, is the disavowal of sexuality as an identity. In black and Latina/o communities alike one’s sexual practices do not always align with a sexual identity. This tension might have something to do with the complex history of black and brown people’s bodies being seen as abject and their sexuality pathological, and the response to that abjection and pathologizing discourse being one of social conservative views of sexuality in general and nonnormative sexuality in particular. In Jeffrey Q. McCune Jr.’s *Dancin’ the Down Low*, for example, he takes up the question of whether black men who have sex with men, but who do not identify as gay, are actually self-loathing or if their “down low” status suggests a more nuanced sexual expression that resists compulsory homonormative notions of “coming out.” Based on ethnographic research in bars, online, and in phone chat rooms that black and Latino men frequent, *Dancin’ the Down Low* highlights the paradox of “down low” nomenclature: sexual behavior that is purportedly clandestine is quite often performed in public spaces. The play suggests that by engaging in down-low behavior these men (and some women) must “dance” around a host of discursive and material traps that either pressures them to claim a sexual identity or that positions them as vectors of contagion.

Lisa B. Thompson’s essay on the play, “Queering Black Identity and Desire: Jeffrey Q. McCune Jr.’s *Dancin’ the Down Low*,” analyzes the play on its own terms by calling attention to the way in which it queers and troubles traditional notions of black male sexuality. Thompson argues that the dancing metaphor in the piece operates on many registers: it indexes the way the men “pivot between identities and worlds,” creatively refusing to be “fixed in place,” and the way they “dance around

the truth—a strategy to avoid an answer or commitment.” Thompson also commends McCune’s inclusion of black women’s voices, but suggests that the play could offer equally complicated depictions of black women as it does of black down-low (DL) men.

In his interview with John Keene, McCune suggests that DL men being blamed for the rise of new cases of HIV/AIDS among heterosexual black women motivated him to write a play that would counter that discourse. McCune tells Keene that writing the play was his way “to perform activism while also at the same time producing theater” and as “a corrective to the media’s discussions of down-low men, particularly concerning the demonizing narratives around just plain-old cheaters without explanation, with no gesture towards the social, economical or sociopolitical issues black men are facing.”

In Cedric Brown’s *Cuban Hustle*, Cuban and American relations remain at the center, but the play homes in on the question of power relations vis-à-vis desire. The play is told from the perspective of a black gay American tourist, who meets Félix, a young Afro-Cuban, on a trip to Cuba. The Narrator and Félix have an intense fling, leading to the American agreeing to have Félix come to the United States to live with him. After the Narrator sends him the money, however, Félix disappears abruptly, leaving the Narrator questioning, “Was it love or money?” This rhetorical question is not one only posed to Félix, but to the Narrator himself.

Marlon M. Bailey’s essay, “Love and Money: Performing Black Queer Diasporic Desire in *Cuban Hustle*,” echoes this question, but mostly engages the play from the perspective of how its thematics highlight the limited erotic possibilities and marginalization of black gay men in the United States and Cuba and, alternatively, the potential of erotic desirability in the black queer diaspora. Having performed in a production of the play, Bailey, like Richardson writing about *The love conjure/blues Text Installation*, has the benefit of an insider’s perspective. As such, he argues that it is performance that most effectively demonstrates black queer diasporic desire as it manifests in the play. Ultimately, Bailey suggests that the play demonstrates “the transcendent possibilities of alternative sexual and sociocultural geographies and imaginaries.”

In her interview with Brown, D. Soyini Madison raises questions regarding the play’s seemingly unsympathetic politics toward Cuba as inferred by the title and presented through the portrayal of the character Félix. While Brown resists the suggestion that the play portrays Cuba in a unilaterally unsympathetic light, he does admit that the play is a “metaphor for the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba” and under-

girded by what Madison refers to as a “political economy of love,” which speaks to the “politics of poverty in the so-called Third World.” Brown suggests, however, that despite the power differential in the relationship between the Narrator and Félix, both men are in search of something that neither can fully provide.

Pamela Booker’s *Seens from the Unexpectedness of Love* brings the focus back to a North American context, but nonetheless transgresses borders and boundaries. Specifically, the play unmoors gender to any specific body while also being very committed to telling the story of lesbian lovers. Like Bridgforth and so many of the other artists in the volume, Booker riffs on Western theatrical conventions to both comment on their restrictions and demonstrate how one might exploit those very conventions to subvert them. Indeed, the entire play seems to provide a metacommentary on theater itself in its employment of Brechtian alienation effects, a Greek chorus, masks, and the occupations of the protagonists as theater artists, as a way to call into question what the audience and the two protagonists are seeing through their “rose-colored glasses.” Is it really love for the other? The theater? Neither?

Omi Osun Joni L. Jones’s essay, “‘Public Intimacy’: Women-Loving-Women as Dramaturgical Transgressions,” takes up the question of theatrical conventions in the play to suggest that Booker uses the trope of love and experiments with dramatic form in order to offer a “resistive” strategy against oppressive forms. Those oppressive forms, according to Jones, are the homophobic black community in which the two characters live and the traditional conventions and themes of black theater. She suggests that Booker’s play, while about two black women, does not make race the central theme, but rather their queerness. Coupled with their queerness is their middle-class status, which, according to Jones, positions the protagonists as outside “normative” representations of middle-class blackness. Jones argues that “it is the *visible* fact of Queerness, of public sexual intimacy between [the two characters]—both the scene it makes as display of queerness, and the act of queerness being *seen* by a policing public—that must be immediately punished by society.”

In Tavia Nyong’o’s interview with Booker, the playwright discusses her engagement with theater as a form through these characters, but with the aim of highlighting the ways in which love is staged—not only in our romantic relationships but in our relationships in the theater itself, leading her to ask, “And what does it say about who these people really are when they go home at the end of the day from the theater and remove their masks?” Nyong’o also engages Booker about the char-

acters' resistance to gender specificity, noting that from the outset of the play it is difficult to discern their gender. In her response, Booker explains what is perhaps the point of the play: "There are some larger global features or universal themes that are necessarily implicit in how people love regardless of gender."

Paul Outlaw's show *Berserker* ramps up the ante in both its themes and performance conventions. The central characters of the play are nineteenth-century slave-rebellion leader Nat Turner and the 1980s white serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, whose victims were African American and Asian American men. Beyond representing diametrically opposed motivations for their actions, Turner and Dahmer are brought together in this play through Outlaw's association of both with the European mythological figures, berserkers, who, when on the battlefield, could slip "into a state of uncontrolled psychic fury" in which they would "exhibit the most inexplicable and gratuitous cruelty." Outlaw's performance choices reflect this "psychic fury," as he appears naked at the outset of the play and variously bursts bags filled with the entrails of murdered bodies and a number of highly stylized "gruesome" acts to represent the violence that each man has enacted. The audience is challenged to make sense of this provocative coupling while also attending to Outlaw's own personal story of family tension around colorism that seems to hover above the play as metaphor for all kinds of social relations.

Charles I. Nero does not shy away from the question that readers and audiences of this play undoubtedly ask by making it the title of his essay: "What's Nat Turner Doing Up in Here with All These Queers? Paul Outlaw's *Berserker*; A Black Gay Meditation on Interracial Desire and Disappearing Blackness." Nero is not being facetious and fervently engages the question as to why Outlaw would juxtapose a figure like Nat Turner, who murdered whites in order to escape chattel slavery, with Jeffrey Dahmer, a person who murdered African American and Asian-descended men for sport. In wrestling with this question, Nero conjectures that the pairing is Outlaw's commentary on American masculinity and interracial desire. Nero argues that by creating a symbolic "battlefield" onstage, Outlaw works through the complexity of desire for the racial other.

In his interview with Vershawn Ashanti Young, Outlaw inevitably answers Nero's question about Turner's presence among the queers when he says that "gay men seem to have a thing with Nat Turner" because they "relate to violence—going off on somebody—as a fantasy, from the place of 'I have been put down.'" This seems to corroborate

Nero's reading of the play as being about desire for the other. Outlaw also comments on the various registers of the stories he wants to tell in general. They involve American history, personal history, race, sex, gender, and sexuality, but ultimately he is compelled to tell the history of blacks and whites in this country because, according to him, there has been no real discussion of race since 1865. Surprisingly, when Young asks Outlaw about the politics of his play, he responds, "It has no politics. I don't think that a piece of art can have politics." Undoubtedly, Outlaw's audiences disagree.

We close the collection with the work of Charles Rice-González. In *I Just Love Andy Gibb*, Rice-González brings us back into the experience of black gay Latinos, Puerto Ricans to be exact, and their navigation of racial economies that render them problematically between or beyond black and white. Rice-González presents the parallel and intersecting stories of two black queer Puerto Rican men, or perhaps, the adult and adolescent version of the same character, coming to recognize their/his racialized self-hatred and move toward an appreciation and love of their/his blackness. Set in the Bronx, much like his acclaimed novel for young audiences, *Chulito*, the piece focuses on the interaction between the two characters, both dark-skinned Puerto Ricans, similarly oriented toward light-skinned objects of desire: a teenage infatuation with white Australian disco sensation Andy Gibb in the case of Roy and a more adult obsession with his light-skinned roommate in the case of Carlos.

In his essay, "Learning to Unlove Andy Gibb: Race, Beauty, and the Erotics of Puerto Rican Black Queer Pedagogy," Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes characterizes the piece as a "therapeutic dream play." Framing his argument through Marlon Riggs's proposition that black men loving each other constitutes a revolutionary act, La Fountain-Stokes explores the politics of racial visibility and invisibility within the homoerotic frameworks of the play. In his interview with Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, Rice-González further discusses his own politics of art production as a queer and black Puerto Rican writer and also explains his investments in *I Just Love Andy Gibb* to argue for a more affirmative assumption of blacktino and queer as identitarian and political ways of being in the world.

These scripts, interviews, and essays showcase blacktino in ways that we hope announce the always already erotic terrain of ethnoracial encounters. Whether through forced contact from structural and institutional racism and homophobia, ancestral blood, or cross-racial desire, queer black and Latina/o bodies cannot escape the touch of the past,

present, or future. What become clear over these pages, then, are the inevitable flirtations, seductions, and even cuckolds that mark the contours of any ethnoracial love affair. Paying homage to elders Johnson and Rivera, we, the queer progeny of that blacktino coupling, offer this collection as a continuation of the legacy for which they fought and fucked.

Notes

- 1 See Omi'seke Natasha Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
- 2 For more on gender/queer orishas, see Yvonne Daniels, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomble* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).
- 3 For a fuller discussion on this topic, see Dwight A. McBride, *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), especially his chapter "It's a White Man's World: Race in the Gay Marketplace of Desire."
- 4 See, for example, Juana María Rodríguez, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, eds., *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Michael Hames-García and Ernesto Javier Martínez, eds., *Gay Latino Studies: A Critical Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); and Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).
- 5 Jafari S. Allen, "Black/Queer/Diaspora at the Current Conjuncture," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, nos. 2–3 (2012): 222.
- 6 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*.
- 7 For a discussion of this elision, see E. Patrick Johnson, "Black Performance Studies: Genealogies, Politics, Futures," in *The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies*, ed. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), 446–63.
- 8 Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (New York: Scribner Poetry, 1975), 11.
- 9 Cherríe L. Moraga, "MeXicana Blues," in *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 51–53.
- 10 Djola Branner, *oranges & honey, in sash & trim and other plays* (Washington, DC: RedBone Press, 2013), 58.
- 11 For more on the blurring of the secular and the sacred in the black gay club,

see E. Patrick Johnson, "Feeling the Spirit in the Dark: Expanding Notions of the Sacred in the African American Gay Community," *Callaloo* 21, no. 2 (Winter/Spring 1998): 399-416.

- 12 E. Patrick Johnson, foreword to *sash & trim and other plays*, by Djola Branner (Washington, DC: RedBone Press, 2013), xiii.